Digital Pathways to Internationalisation: A Qualitative Exploration of How Zambian and Zimbabwean SMEs Use Digital Marketing to Access Markets

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zambia and Zimbabwe use digital marketing to support internationalisation under conditions of resource constraint and institutional fragility. While digital technologies have lowered barriers to global market entry, existing literature provides limited theoretical and empirical insight into how SMEs in resource-constrained African contexts strategically integrate digital marketing into export activities. Adopting a grounded theory approach, this study inductively develops theory from qualitative data collected from 10 SMEs engaged in digital cross-border trade. Data were analysed using iterative open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Four core categories emerged: Network-Enabled Market Access, Experiential Learning Under Constraint, Adaptive Digital Workarounds, and Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways. The study develops an Adaptive Digital Internationalisation Framework, demonstrating that SMEs achieve export competitiveness through adaptive capacity, relational networks, and digital improvisation rather than resource accumulation alone. This extends the Resource-Based View, Uppsala Model, and Born Global perspectives by highlighting the role of social embeddedness and contextual adaptation in shaping internationalisation under constraint. Practical implications are offered for SMEs, policymakers and development institutions seeking to strengthen digital export participation.

Keywords: SMEs, digital marketing, export marketing strategy and internationalisation

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1. INTRODUCTION

SMEs play a critical role in economic development, employment creation, and innovation globally (Chundu 2020). However, their participation in international markets remains limited in developing economies due to structural constraints such as weak infrastructure, limited finance, and institutional instability (Mahamadou 2021; El Moudden & Balhadj 2024). Digital technologies have transformed international business by enabling firms to reach global markets at lower cost (Bermeo-Giraldo et al., 2022; Mitreva et al., 2022). For SMEs, digital marketing tools such as social media and mobile platforms offer alternative pathways to internationalisation. However, adoption remains uneven in sub-Saharan Africa, where digital capability gaps persist (Astuti & Ayinde 2025).

Zambia and Zimbabwe provide relevant contexts due to infrastructural limitations, high data costs, and institutional volatility (Mateko 2024; Sakanya 2024). Despite these challenges, SMEs demonstrate resilience through adaptive and informal strategies. Existing research has largely focused on developed economies, leaving a gap in understanding how SMEs in resource-constrained environments utilise digital marketing for internationalisation. This study addresses this gap by exploring SME practices in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 DIGITALISATION AND SME INTERNATIONALISATION IN EMERGING ECONOMIES

Digitalisation has become one of the most significant forces reshaping global commerce, altering how firms compete, communicate, and integrate into international markets. For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly those located in emerging economies, digital technologies offer a possible means of overcoming structural barriers that historically limited their participation in global value chains. Scholars widely agree that digital tools can lower entry costs, facilitate direct access to consumers, and support long-term competitiveness in foreign markets (Tabuena et al., 2022: 148; Bruce et al., 2023: 3). However, the diffusion of digital practices remains highly uneven, shaped by infrastructural disparities, institutional weaknesses and limited managerial capabilities.

In Zambia and Zimbabwe, these tensions are especially pronounced. While digital adoption has expanded in many developing economies, its implementation among SMEs remains uneven and constrained by broader structural conditions. Prior research shows that SMEs frequently recognise the potential value of digital marketing but struggle to integrate these tools effectively into their business activities (Okwudiri et al., 2025: 40). Infrastructure limitations, particularly unreliable electricity supply and poor internet connectivity, further constrain the ability of SMEs to consistently utilise digital marketing platforms (Okwudiri et al., 2025: 41). In addition, gaps in technical expertise and digital marketing skills among SME owners and employees limit the strategic deployment of these tools (Okwudiri et al., 2025: 41). More broadly, digital marketing adoption in SMEs is shaped by environmental and technological factors that reflect the wider institutional context in which firms operate (Okwudiri et al., 2025; Patil et al., 2022: 52).

How digitalisation reshapes SME internationalisation requires first examining the broader context in which developing-economy SMEs operate. The following section outlines the structural and institutional challenges that define the resource environment for firms in countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe.

2.2 DIGITAL ADOPTION IN AFRICAN SME CONTEXTS

Digital adoption in Africa reflects striking regional disparities. While East and West African economies such as Kenya and Nigeria have benefitted from dynamic mobile ecosystems and relatively supportive digital-policy frameworks, other regions continue to lag due to infrastructural and financial constraints. Across sub-Saharan Africa, internet penetration remains comparatively low, and many SMEs rely on mobile-first digital engagement because it presents the least costly and most accessible entry point (Raji et al., 2024: 740-741).

In Zambia and Zimbabwe, digital adoption accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and movement restrictions forced firms to migrate their operations and marketing activities online (Astari 2021: 125; Katongo & Musawa 2022: 3661). Social media platforms particularly WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram became central tools for maintaining visibility and processing orders. However, while some firms progressed towards more formalised digital strategies, others remained limited to ad hoc, tactical use shaped by affordability and skill deficits.

Despite a growing body of research on SME digital usage, empirical studies examining digital adoption specifically within export strategies remain scarce. The literature tends to focus on digital constraints, specifically highlighting that “SMEs in developing countries face infrastructure-related issues such as unreliable internet access, lack of digital payment systems, or insufficient regulatory support” (Landjohou & Christopher 2026: 2). These environmental hurdles are often compounded by internal limitations, as “the most common factors faced by SMEs are the lack of technical and managerial skills” (Barkley & Jokonya 2024: 1966), which prevents them from moving beyond basic digital readiness. While recent findings suggest that digital marketing and its adoption can “positively affect the performance of SMEs’ business management in [emerging markets]” (Deku et al., 2024: 251), there remains little attention given to how these digital tools are integrated into long-term, export-oriented planning. As a result, many firms view digital tools as a means to “circumvent many [current] constraints” (Landjohou and Christopher, 2026: 1) rather than as a core component of a formalised internationalisation strategy.

The empirical patterns of digital adoption observed among African SMEs raise important theoretical questions about how internationalisation occurs under conditions of constraint. To interpret these patterns systematically, this study draws on three established theoretical perspectives that collectively illuminate different dimensions of the internationalisation process.

2.3 IDENTIFIED GAP

The literature reveals several converging insights that collectively point to a significant research gap. First, SMEs in Zambia and Zimbabwe face substantial structural constraints that limit export competitiveness. These firms often operate in informal sectors where they face similar challenges that inhibit the adoption of advanced technologies and innovations needed to improve business operations (Akpan et al., 2022: 123). Furthermore, SMEs in these regions are frequently “subject to more constraining business environments than SMEs in developed economies” (Epede & Wang 2022: 3), specifically regarding inadequate infrastructure and weak institutional support. Second, digital marketing has demonstrated potential to mitigate these constraints. It has “emerged as a transformative tool that enables SMEs to enhance visibility... and achieve sustainable growth through cost-effective online strategies” (Akpan et al., 2022: 123). Third, digital adoption has increased, particularly post-COVID-19, as the pandemic served as a catalyst for growth in “cross-border business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce” (Cassia & Magno 2022: 268).

However, despite these insights, there is limited empirical research examining how SMEs strategically integrate digital marketing into export strategies targeted at developed markets. Current research often views the internet merely "as a complementary tool to integrate and improve exporters' marketing strategies rather than as a direct sales channel" (Cassia & Magno 2022: 268). This creates a need for a grounded theory lens to allow emergent patterns to surface inductively, as developed markets impose higher expectations concerning quality and compliance barriers that digital visibility alone may not overcome. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Zambian and Zimbabwean SMEs navigate digital internationalisation under conditions of resource constraint and institutional fragility, moving beyond e-commerce as a mere "supplement to offline exporting activities" (Cassia & Magno 2022: 267).

This gap is significant because developed markets impose higher expectations concerning quality, compliance, and communication. Understanding how SMEs in resource-limited environments deploy digital tools to meet these demands is therefore essential. The present study addresses this gap by examining digital adoption, challenges, capabilities, and impacts within the export strategies of SMEs in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in a pragmatic orientation, which supported methodological flexibility and the generation of contextually relevant insights on SME digital internationalisation in Zambia and Zimbabwe (Creswell & Creswell 2022: 39; Hays & McKibben 2021: 179). Pragmatism aligned with the study's conceptual framework RBV, the Uppsala Model, and Born Global perspectives by emphasising practical problem-solving and the ways firms combine resources, experiential learning, and entrepreneurial action when entering developed markets.

Given the limited theorisation of digital export behaviour among African SMEs, grounded theory provided the core research strategy, allowing categories and explanations to emerge inductively from participants' accounts (Elliott & Higgins 2023: 152; O'Callaghan et al., 2024: 4). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with owners and managers of SMEs in Lusaka and Harare, selected through purposive sampling for their active engagement in digital cross-border activities. Theoretical sampling was used iteratively to refine emerging insights. Ten SMEs were included and evenly split between the two countries (five interviews per country), which ensured variation in sector and export maturity.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Zoom and WhatsApp between June and September 2024, lasted 45-70 minutes, were audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview protocol explored SMEs' digital marketing practices, export strategies, experiences with international markets, and perceptions of institutional support. Supplementary data were collected through company websites, social media pages, and digital promotional materials to triangulate participant accounts and provide contextual depth.

The study included ten SMEs five from Zambia and five from Zimbabwe spanning agriculture, manufacturing, and retail sectors. Participants were selected through purposive sampling for their active engagement in digital cross-border activities and willingness to share experiences. Theoretical sampling was applied iteratively to refine emerging insights and ensure variation in firm size, sector, and export maturity. Theoretical saturation was reached after eight interviews, at which point no new categories emerged and the relationships among constructs had stabilised. Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm that saturation had been achieved and to validate the coherence of emergent categories.

Data were analysed using grounded theory procedures informed by thematic analysis (O'Callaghan et al., 2024: 3-4), combining inductive coding with the systematic identification of recurring patterns. The analytic process proceeded through three iterative stages (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Open coding involved line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts in NVivo 13R, generating initial codes that captured participants' accounts of digital marketing use, export decisions, and resource adaptation. Examples of initial codes included digital improvisation, diaspora payment facilitation, trial-and-error marketing, and WhatsApp-based commerce. Through constant comparison, these initial codes were progressively merged into broader analytical categories during axial coding. For instance, codes relating to trial-and-error marketing, peer learning, and informal mentorship were synthesised into the higher-order category of experiential adaptation mechanisms. Similarly, codes such as diaspora linkages, cross-border trust networks, and relatives abroad as intermediaries were integrated into network-driven access strategies. Selective coding then integrated these axial categories into four core categories that captured the central phenomena emerging from the data: (1) Network-Enabled Market Access, (2) Experiential Learning Under Constraint, (3) Adaptive Digital Workarounds, and (4) Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways. These categories were refined iteratively until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new categories emerged and the relationships among constructs stabilised into a coherent explanatory framework. NVivo 13R's audit-trail function ensured that every analytical code could be traced back to its originating transcript, strengthening confirmability and reproducibility (Alam 2021:14). Reflexive memos recorded the researcher's evolving insights and decision-making, creating a visible record of interpretive choices and mitigating unconscious bias (Bingham 2023: 3). The conceptual framework outlined in the literature review served as a set of sensitising concepts rather than fixed categories, focusing attention on resource dynamics (RBV), learning processes (Uppsala), and early internationalisation (Born Global) while allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' lived experiences.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking of interview summaries (credibility), transparent documentation of coding and analytic decisions (dependability), reflexive journaling to bracket researcher assumptions (confirmability), and rich contextual description of both research sites (transferability). Ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data storage, were rigorously observed.

3.1 DATA ANALYSIS AND CODING PROCESS

The grounded theory coding process proceeded through three iterative stages (see Table 1). **Open coding** involved line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts in NVivo 13R, generating initial codes that captured participants' accounts of digital marketing use, export decisions, and resource adaptation. Examples of initial codes included *digital improvisation*, *diaspora payment facilitation*, *trial-and-error marketing*, and *WhatsApp-based commerce*.

Through **constant comparison**, these initial codes were progressively merged into broader analytical categories during **axial coding**. For instance, codes relating to *trial-and-error marketing*, *peer learning*, and *informal mentorship* were synthesised into the higher-order category of *experiential adaptation mechanisms*. Similarly, codes such as *diaspora linkages*, *cross-border trust networks*, and *relatives abroad as intermediaries* were integrated into *network-driven access strategies*.

Selective coding then integrated these axial categories into four core categories that captured the central phenomena emerging from the data: (1) Network-Enabled Market Access, (2) Experiential Learning Under Constraint, (3) Adaptive Digital Workarounds, and (4) Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways. These categories were refined iteratively until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new categories emerged and the relationships among constructs stabilised into a coherent explanatory framework.

TABLE 1: PROGRESSION FROM INITIAL CODES TO CORE CATEGORIES THROUGH GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

Initial Codes (Open Coding)	Axial Codes (Grouped Categories)	Core Category	Supporting Evidence
→ Digital improvisation → Trial-and-error marketing → Peer learning via WhatsApp groups → Informal mentorship → Learning from competitors → Iterative content refinement → Student/family digital support → Community-based knowledge sharing	Experiential adaptation mechanisms How SMEs build capability through informal, peer-based learning rather than formal training	**Experiential Learning Under Constraint**	P4: "We learn from each other in our business group" P7: "At first, we just posted pictures, but then we realised..."
→ Diaspora payment facilitation → Cross-border trust networks → WhatsApp-based commerce → Relatives abroad as intermediaries → Family referrals for market entry → Diaspora as logistics coordinators → Mobile money workarounds → Informal export channels	Network-driven access strategies How social capital and diaspora networks substitute for formal institutional infrastructure	**Network-Enabled Market Access**	P1, P3, P6: Diaspora intermediaries "Relatives abroad act as payment processors"
→ WhatsApp catalogues vs websites → Canva/CapCut for design → Family members managing social media → Mobile money for transactions → Free platforms overpaid advertising → "My niece helps with Instagram" → Repurposing consumer tools → Low-cost digital substitutions	Resource-substitution tactics How SMEs improvise affordable digital solutions in response to financial and infrastructural constraints	**Adaptive Digital Workarounds**	P8: "WhatsApp catalogue instead of website" "We use Canva because we can't afford a designer"
→ Rapid digital market entry (some firms) → Incremental testing (other firms) → Mixed pathway patterns → Diaspora-accelerated internationalisation → Organic gradual growth → Simultaneous caution and speed → Born Global-like agility → Uppsala-like learning	Dual-speed internationalisation patterns How firms navigate both incremental (Uppsala) and accelerated (Born Global) routes depending on resources and opportunities	**Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways**	Some SMEs: immediate international reach Others: gradual diaspora-mediated expansion

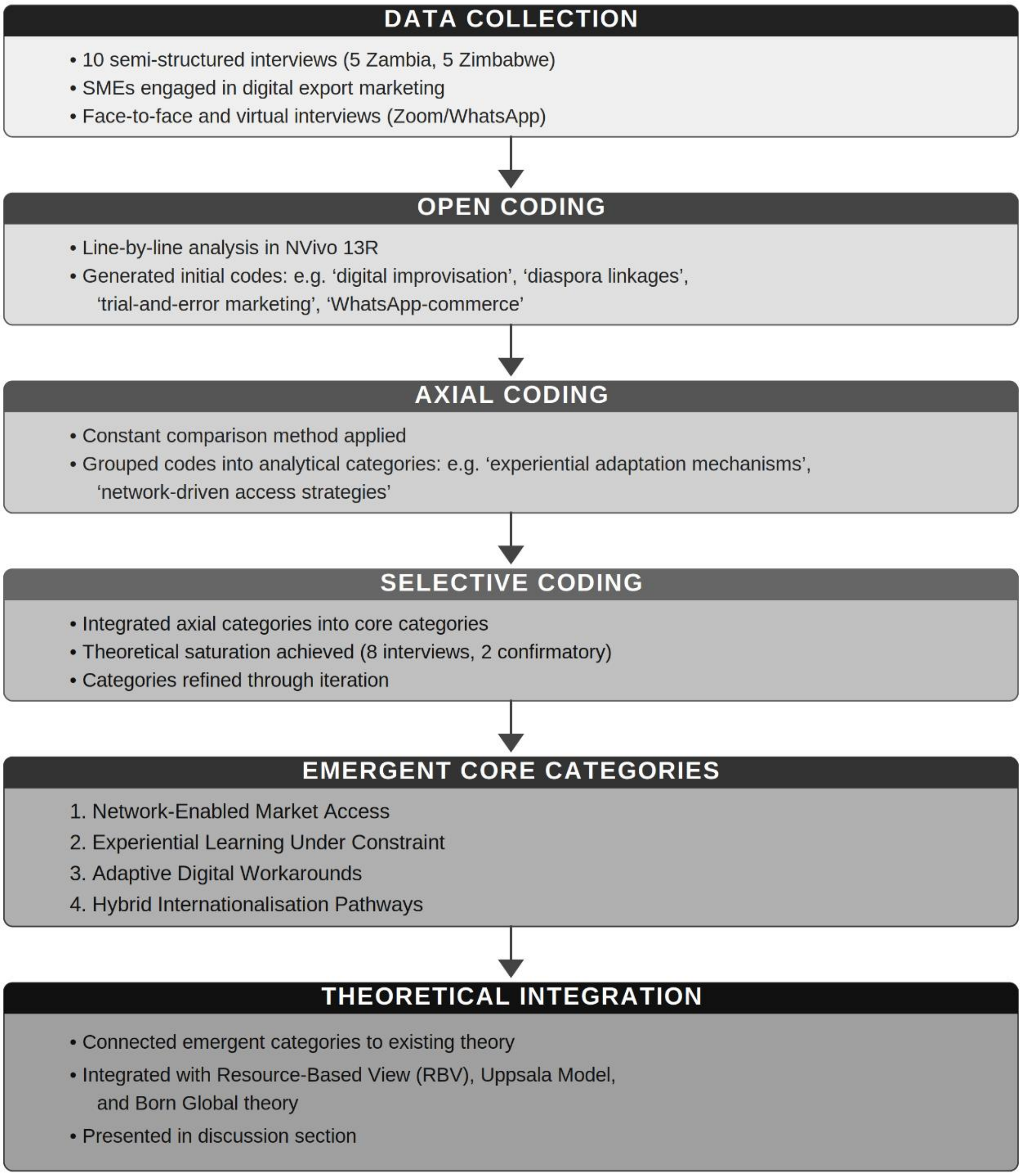

FIGURE 1: GROUNDED THEORY CODING PROCESS

This figure illustrates the analytical progression from data collection through open, axial, and selective coding to the emergence of four core categories using NVivo 13R software.

4. FINDINGS

Four core categories emerged from the grounded theory analysis, each reflecting how SMEs in Zambia and Zimbabwe navigate digital internationalisation under conditions of resource constraint and institutional volatility. These categories, Network-Enabled Market Access, Experiential Learning Under Constraint, Adaptive Digital Workarounds, and Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways, were identified inductively through open, axial, and selective coding (see Table 1 and Figure 1) and are presented below with supporting evidence from participant accounts.

4.1 NETWORK-ENABLED MARKET ACCESS

The first emergent category reveals how social capital and diaspora networks substitute for formal institutional infrastructure in enabling market access. Analysis of interview transcripts identified recurring codes relating to cross-border trust relationships, diaspora intermediaries, and informal digital channels which functioned as bridges to international markets.

Participants repeatedly highlighted the role of digital platforms in enhancing visibility for international buyers, particularly diaspora consumers who act as early adopters. One Zimbabwean agricultural exporter remarked,

Participant 1 (P1, Zimbabwe, Agriculture): *"Before Facebook, nobody in the UK knew we existed. Now people message us directly asking for samples."*

Digital tools also created a perception of professionalism, which participants viewed as essential for entering developed markets. A Zambian craft producer explained,

Participant 6 (P6, Zambia, Crafts/Retail): *"When clients see our Instagram page, they think we are a big company. It helps them trust us before we even speak."*

Moreover, SMEs described digital platforms as reducing uncertainty by allowing them to test products and prices. An exporter from Harare shared,

Participant 2 (P2, Zimbabwe, Manufacturing): *"We post something online, and within hours we know if people overseas like it. That saves us money because we don't produce what won't sell."*

Diaspora communities played critical roles as distributors, intermediaries, and informal quality validators. A Zimbabwean crafts producer noted,

Participant 3 (P3, Zimbabwe, Crafts): *"My cousin in Canada handles deliveries for us. Customers trust her, so that helps a lot."*

These diaspora-enabled pathways demonstrate how SMEs leverage relational capital to circumvent formal export channels and establish credibility in foreign markets. This aligns with Johanson and Vahlne’s (2009: 1411) revised Uppsala model, which emphasises that network relationships and trust are foundational to internationalisation, particularly in markets characterised by high uncertainty. Similarly, Epede and Wang (2022: 3) note that SMEs in developing economies face “more constraining business environments” than their counterparts in developed economies, making relational substitutes for institutional infrastructure especially critical. The findings across all ten participants confirm that diaspora networks function not merely as social ties but as strategic assets that reduce transactional risk and enable market credibility.

Across both research settings, SMEs consistently described enhanced visibility and credibility as the most significant advantages of digital marketing for export participation. This resonates with Bruce et al. (2023: 3), who confirm that digital tools lower entry costs, facilitate direct consumer access, and support competitiveness in foreign markets. Digital tools also improved responsiveness, enabling SMEs to explain product features, negotiate prices, manage orders, and address customer inquiries in real time across multiple time zones — engagement that would have been prohibitively expensive through traditional channels. The findings further reveal that SMEs used digital platforms to mitigate risk by testing demand, experimenting with pricing, and exploring product preferences before committing to production investments. Cassia and Magno (2022: 268) similarly observe that digital channels allow SMEs to move beyond the internet as a “complementary tool” and use it strategically as a direct international sales pathway. These patterns were evident across all ten participants (P1–P5, Zimbabwe; P6–P10, Zambia), affirming the centrality of network-enabled access as a core internationalisation mechanism in both country contexts.

4.2 EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING UNDER CONSTRAINT

The second category emerged from codes relating to trial-and-error marketing, peer learning through WhatsApp business groups, and iterative refinement of digital strategies. Rather than following formal marketing plans or structured training programmes, participants demonstrated that capability development in resource-constrained contexts occurs through experimentation and community knowledge-sharing.

Participants consistently reported high usage of low-cost, mobile-based platforms, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. WhatsApp emerged as the most indispensable tool for daily operations, functioning simultaneously as a communication channel, catalogue, customer support system, and order-tracking platform. Several participants described WhatsApp as the "heart" of their business. One Zimbabwean manufacturing owner stated,

Participant 4 (P4, Zimbabwe, Manufacturing): *"If I lost WhatsApp, I would lose half of my customers in a day. It's basically my office."*

However, participants acknowledged the limited use of more advanced digital marketing tools such as websites, paid advertising, analytics, and SEO. These tools were used mainly by firms with higher financial resources or those whose products required greater legitimacy. A Zambian participant explained,

Participant 7 (P7, Zambia, Services): *"We want a proper website, but it's expensive to build and even more expensive to maintain. So we just use Facebook because it works for now."*

Across both countries, SMEs demonstrated considerable enthusiasm for digital marketing, particularly for mobile-based and low-cost platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. These tools were described as accessible, functional, and responsive to immediate needs. However, more advanced digital marketing tools, including websites, search engine optimisation, analytics, and paid advertising, were utilised by only a minority of the participants.

This pattern reflects the functional deployment of available resources. SMEs adopt tools that offer immediate value and align with their operational capacity, even when they recognise the potential benefits of more sophisticated alternatives. The willingness to engage digitally remained strong, but adoption patterns were shaped by cost, capability, and necessity rather than strategic planning or formal guidance. This mirrors findings by Okwudiri et al. (2025: 41), who identify gaps in technical expertise and digital marketing skills as key constraints on the strategic deployment of digital tools among SMEs in developing economies. Barkley and Jokonya (2024: 1966) similarly note that “the most common factors faced by SMEs are the lack of technical and managerial skills,” preventing firms from moving beyond basic digital readiness. Among the ten participants in this study, Zimbabwean participants (P4 and P5) and Zambian participants (P7 and P8) explicitly described learning through peer communities and informal networks as their primary mode of capability development, underscoring that experiential learning under constraint is not incidental but structurally embedded in their internationalisation practice.

4.3 ADAPTIVE DIGITAL WORKAROUNDS

The third category emerged from codes relating to digital improvisation, low-cost tool substitution, and creative problem-solving. Participants revealed a distinctive pattern of innovation under constraint, where formal digital infrastructure was substituted with accessible, repurposed, and informal alternatives.

Despite systemic constraints, participants demonstrated considerable creativity in navigating digital export processes. SMEs frequently relied on informal networks to fill capability gaps. A Zambian participant shared,

Participant 8 (P8, Zambia, Agriculture): *"My niece runs our Instagram because she understands these things better. I can't afford a social media manager."*

Improvisation was common. WhatsApp catalogues were used in place of formal websites, and mobile money solutions substituted for international payment systems whereever possible. One participant summarised this reality:

Participant 9 (P9, Zambia, Manufacturing): *"We don't have fancy systems, but we make what we have work."*

A defining feature of the findings is the extent to which SMEs demonstrated ingenuity in navigating constraints. Many firms relied on improvised solutions, including WhatsApp-based catalogues, peer-sourced advice, family labour, and diaspora logistics networks. These practices illustrate a distinctive form of "innovation under constraint." SMEs leveraged relational and culturally embedded resources trust networks, kinship ties, and informal collaborations to compensate for gaps in formal infrastructure, finance, and technical capacity.

The theme demonstrates both resilience and pragmatism. SMEs adapted their digital strategies not through comprehensive planning but through continuous iteration, learning what worked through direct feedback from customers and peers. This adaptive capacity emerged as a critical competitive advantage in environments where formal support structures were weak or absent. As Landjohou and Christopher (2026: 1) observe, digital tools allow SMEs to “circumvent many current constraints,” functioning less as components of formalised strategy and more as instruments of survival and improvisation in fragile institutional environments. This is consistent with Akpan et al. (2022: 123), who find that digital marketing has “emerged as a transformative tool that enables SMEs to enhance visibility and achieve sustainable growth through cost-effective online strategies.” Across all ten participants, adaptive workarounds were universal: Zambian participants (P8, P9, P10) described WhatsApp catalogues and peer-managed social media accounts, while Zimbabwean participants (P1, P3, P4) relied on diaspora logistics and mobile money substitutes, demonstrating that creative improvisation, not resource accumulation, drives digital competitiveness in resource-constrained contexts.

4.4 CONTEXTUAL BARRIERS SHAPING DIGITAL INTERNATIONALISATION

Alongside the emergent categories, participants consistently described structural and institutional barriers that shaped the conditions under which digital internationalisation occurred. These contextual factors influenced all four core categories and are presented here to provide the institutional backdrop against which SME strategies must be understood.

Despite widespread adoption, participants described systemic constraints that limited the depth of digital integration. Financial limitations were frequently mentioned. A participant from Lusaka noted,

Participant 10 (P10, Zambia, Retail): *"We want to advertise, but even ten dollars a week is a lot for a small business here."*

Digital literacy challenges also affected strategic use. One Zimbabwean respondent admitted,

Participant 5 (P5, Zimbabwe, Services): *"I post, but I don't know how to check the numbers or boost the right audience. I just do what I can."*

Infrastructure weaknesses such as unstable connectivity, power cuts, and high data costs were recurring concerns. A Harare-based retailer stated,

Participant 2 (P2, Zimbabwe, Manufacturing): *"Sometimes a buyer is online waiting, but ZESA goes, and everything stops. You can lose a deal just like that."*

Institutional instability further complicated export processes. Participants in Zimbabwe described payment disruptions caused by shifting monetary policies. One participant said,

Participant 4 (P4, Zimbabwe, Manufacturing): *"Foreign clients get worried when our payment systems change every few months. It makes us look unreliable even when the problem is national."*

Despite the benefits, SMEs in both countries faced persistent structural and institutional challenges that constrained their ability to fully integrate digital marketing into export strategies. Digital literacy gaps further limited strategic adoption. Many participants were comfortable with basic social media use but lacked the expertise to deploy analytics, automate campaigns, or target specific demographic segments. Infrastructure weaknesses also affected digital participation. High data costs, unstable networks, and frequent power outages, especially acute in Zimbabwe, disrupted communication, delayed responses, and undermined the professional image SMEs sought to project.

These findings emphasise that digital marketing exists within, and is shaped by, broader systemic conditions. Weak institutions and infrastructural deficiencies do not simply constrain adoption; they fundamentally reshape how SMEs engage with digital tools, driving improvisation and informality as survival mechanisms. These accounts show that SME digital engagement is strongly conditioned by structural realities beyond their control. Okwudiri et al. (2025: 40–41) corroborate this, noting that “infrastructure limitations, particularly unreliable electricity supply and poor internet connectivity,” prevent SMEs from consistently utilising digital marketing platforms. Landjohou and Christopher (2026: 2) similarly identify “unreliable internet access, lack of digital payment systems, and insufficient regulatory support” as defining hurdles for developing-economy SMEs. Importantly, these barriers were not abstract for the ten participants: P2 (Zimbabwe) cited ZESA power outages disrupting live buyer engagements; P4 (Zimbabwe) described shifting monetary policies eroding buyer confidence; and P10 (Zambia) highlighted the disproportionate cost burden of even minimal digital advertising. These experiences collectively underscore that structural context, not firm-level strategy alone, determines the ceiling of digital internationalisation for SMEs in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

4.5 HYBRID INTERNATIONALISATION PATHWAYS

The fourth emergent category revealed an unexpected finding: SMEs did not follow a single, linear internationalisation pathway. Instead, analysis identified a dual-speed pattern in which firms navigated both incremental (Uppsala-style) and accelerated (Born Global-style) routes simultaneously, with the specific trajectory determined by available diaspora networks, digital literacy, and contextual opportunities.

A subset of SMEs displayed traits associated with Born Global firms, rapidly entering multiple international markets through digital platforms and targeting niche segments from inception. These firms leveraged online visibility to bypass traditional stage-wise expansion. However, their success was often contingent on strong diaspora connections or unique product differentiation rather than on formal resources or sophisticated digital capabilities. These finding challenge conventional Born Global assumptions by demonstrating that rapid internationalisation in resource-constrained contexts depends less on entrepreneurial intent or advanced digital infrastructure and more on opportunistic exploitation of relational networks and platform affordances.

The relationship between policy environments and SME digital marketing behaviour emerged as a critical dimension of this category. In Zambia, participants acknowledged national initiatives such as the Smart Zambia Master Plan and efforts to expand digital infrastructure. However, implementation remained inconsistent, and benefits were concentrated in urban centres. Rural firms and those outside Lusaka experienced marginal improvements at best.

In Zimbabwe, institutional volatility posed more immediate risks. Frequent regulatory changes affecting currency systems, mobile money services, and cross-border payment mechanisms created uncertainty and eroded buyer confidence. Participants described these disruptions as undermining credibility with international clients, even though the instability originated at the national rather than firm level.

At a regional level, awareness of SADC and COMESA digital trade initiatives was extremely low among SMEs. Participants did not view these frameworks as actionable tools for facilitating export participation. The disconnect between regional policy ambitions and firm-level awareness suggests that digital internationalisation proceeds largely outside formal institutional structures, relying instead on informal networks, peer learning, and adaptive experimentation.

This category demonstrates that internationalisation pathways are neither uniformly incremental nor uniformly accelerated. Instead, they are hybrid, contingent, and deeply embedded in the specific social, infrastructural, and institutional contexts in which SMEs operate. Digital platforms enable both rapid and gradual market entry, but the pathway taken depends as much on available networks and environmental stability as on firm-level resources or strategic orientation. This duality resonates with the revised Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne 2009: 1411), which situates internationalisation within relational and network contexts rather than treating it as a purely firm-driven, linear process. At the same time, the rapid entry patterns observed among some participants parallel Born Global characteristics identified by Knight and Cavusgil (1996: 13), particularly the use of digital platforms to bypass incremental expansion. However, as the accounts of all ten participants reveal, Born Global agility in these contexts is not anchored in entrepreneurial intent alone but in the availability and stability of diaspora networks, a finding that meaningfully extends existing theory by foregrounding social embeddedness as an enabling condition for accelerated internationalisation in fragile economies.

5. THEORETICAL INTEGRATION: HOW EMERGENT CATEGORIES EXTEND EXISTING THEORY

Having presented the four emergent categories inductively identified through grounded theory analysis, this section examines how they collectively extend and challenge existing internationalisation theory. Three theoretical lenses dominate the analysis of SME internationalisation and provide essential frameworks for understanding the dynamics observed in Zambia and Zimbabwe: the Resource-Based View (RBV), the Uppsala Internationalisation Model, and the Born Global perspective. Each is introduced below, followed by an analysis of how the emergent categories Network-Enabled Market Access, Experiential Learning Under Constraint, Adaptive Digital Workarounds, and Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways extend, nuance, or challenge these established perspectives.

5.1 EXTENDING THE RESOURCE-BASED VIEW

The Resource-Based View (RBV), pioneered by Wernerfelt (1984) and further developed by Barney (1991), posits that sustainable competitive advantage arises from firm-specific resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable collectively known as VRIN resources. According to Barney (1991:105), resources that meet these criteria enable firms to implement strategies that competitors cannot easily replicate, thereby generating superior performance. For SMEs in resource-constrained contexts, the RBV directs attention to how firms leverage scarce assets strategically. Digital skills, market knowledge, relational networks, and online reputation can function as VRIN resources, particularly when they are contextually embedded and difficult for competitors to duplicate.

The emergent categories reveal that valuable, rare, and inimitable resources in resource-constrained contexts extend beyond tangible firm assets to include socially embedded and relationally constructed capabilities. The category of Adaptive Digital Workarounds demonstrates that SMEs in Zambia and Zimbabwe create strategic value not through possession of advanced digital infrastructure but through improvisation, repurposing of consumer tools, and leveraging of informal networks. WhatsApp catalogues, family-managed social media accounts, and peer-sourced digital advice function as VRIN-like assets precisely because they are contextually embedded and difficult for competitors to replicate.

Similarly, Network-Enabled Market Access highlights that diaspora networks and cross-border trust relationships constitute critical strategic resources which substitute for formal institutional infrastructure. These relational assets enable market entry, payment facilitation, and credibility-building in ways that formal marketing budgets or advanced digital platforms cannot achieve in environments characterised by institutional voids. This finding extends RBV reasoning by demonstrating that in fragile economies, socially embedded and trust-based resources can perform functions analogous to more conventional competitive advantages.

However, the findings also challenge traditional RBV assumptions. While RBV emphasises resource accumulation and strategic deployment, the category of Experiential Learning Under Constraint reveals that capability development in resource-scarce settings proceeds not through linear accumulation but through continuous iteration, peer learning, and adaptive experimentation. SMEs build digital marketing competencies incrementally through trial-and-error and community knowledge-sharing rather than through formal training or strategic resource investments. This suggests that in contexts of constraint, dynamic capabilities the capacity to reconfigure and adapt resources may be more critical than resource stocks themselves.

5.2 NUANCING THE UPPSALA MODEL

The Uppsala Internationalisation Model, originally proposed by Johanson & Vahlne (1977) and subsequently revised in 2009, conceptualises internationalisation as a gradual, experiential, learning-driven process. The model posits that firms enter foreign markets cautiously, beginning with psychically close markets and low-commitment modes such as exporting through agents, and progressively increase their commitment as they accumulate experiential knowledge and reduce uncertainty (Johanson & Vahlne 1977: 23-24). The 2009 revision emphasised the role of business networks and relationships, arguing that knowledge development and opportunity recognition are embedded in relational contexts rather than occurring solely within the firm (Johanson & Vahlne 2009: 1411). For SMEs, the Uppsala Model suggests that internationalisation proceeds incrementally, shaped by learning-by-doing and iterative risk management.

The category of Experiential Learning Under Constraint strongly resonates with Uppsala logic, demonstrating that SMEs continue to internationalise through learning-by-doing despite the availability of digital platforms. Participants described testing demand through small-scale online campaigns, refining product presentations based on customer feedback, and gradually expanding to new markets as confidence and knowledge accumulated. In the digital context, this logic remains relevant: although digital platforms accelerate information flows and reduce some forms of uncertainty, firms still rely on experiential feedback to refine strategies, test demand, and build confidence before committing substantial resources to foreign markets.

However, the category of Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways extends Uppsala reasoning by revealing that digital platforms compress the time required for experiential learning while simultaneously enabling multiple internationalisation trajectories to coexist. Some SMEs followed classic Uppsala patterns, moving incrementally from diaspora markets to broader international engagement. Others leveraged digital visibility to achieve rapid market entry consistent with Born Global characteristics. Most significantly, many firms exhibited both patterns simultaneously cautiously testing some markets while aggressively pursuing others depending on the strength of diaspora networks, product differentiation, and institutional stability in target regions.

This finding suggests that the Uppsala model's linear, stage-based logic may be overly rigid for contexts where digital tools enable opportunistic acceleration alongside cautious experimentation. Digital platforms reduce psychic distance by providing real-time market feedback and low-cost communication channels, yet they do not eliminate the need for experiential learning or the value of incremental commitment. The result is a hybrid internationalisation process in which firms oscillate between gradual and rapid pathways depending on available resources, relational capital, and contextual conditions. The model thus provides a framework for understanding how digital tools mediate but do not eliminate the learning processes central to internationalisation.

5.3 CHALLENGING BORN GLOBAL ASSUMPTIONS

In contrast to the Uppsala Model's emphasis on gradual progression, the Born Global perspective, introduced by Knight & Cavusgil (1996) and Oviatt & McDougall (1994), recognises that some firms internationalise rapidly from or near inception, bypassing the incremental stages predicted by traditional models. Born Global firms are typically characterised by entrepreneurial orientation, niche differentiation, technological innovation, and the strategic use of digital platforms to access international markets early in their lifecycle (Knight & Cavusgil 1996: 13; Oviatt & McDougall 1994: 49). Rather than learning experientially through staged expansion, these firms leverage pre-existing knowledge, global networks, and digital infrastructure to achieve early international reach and revenue. The Born Global perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how digitalisation enables rapid market entry, as online platforms reduce entry barriers, compress time-to-market, and facilitate direct engagement with geographically dispersed customers.

The subset of SMEs in this study that displayed Born Global traits rapidly entering multiple markets, targeting diaspora segments, and achieving early international sales appears to validate this perspective. However, the category of **Network-Enabled Market Access** reveals that rapid digital internationalisation in resource-constrained contexts depends less on entrepreneurial intent or advanced digital capabilities and more on the availability of diaspora networks and informal relational capital. SMEs that achieved accelerated market entry typically did so not because of strategic global orientation but because diaspora intermediaries provided initial demand, payment facilitation, and credibility signals that formal channels could not deliver.

Moreover, the category of **Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways** demonstrates that Born Global patterns in Zambia and Zimbabwe are fragile and contingent. Rapid digital entry was often followed by operational challenges payment disruptions, logistical difficulties, and regulatory uncertainty that forced firms to revert to more cautious, incremental strategies. This finding challenges the Born Global assumption that rapid internationalisation is inherently sustainable or strategically advantageous. In contexts marked by institutional volatility, accelerated pathways may expose firms to risks that gradual, experiential learning helps to mitigate. For SMEs in developing economies, the Born Global framework raises important questions about whether resource constraints and institutional weaknesses limit or reshape the pathways to rapid internationalisation, and whether early digital engagement translates into sustained competitive advantage or remains fragile due to operational and environmental volatility.

The findings thus suggest that the Born Global theory, developed primarily in stable institutional environments, requires significant adaptation when applied to fragile economies. Rapid digital internationalisation is possible but remains highly dependent on social infrastructure (diaspora networks) and vulnerable to systemic instability (policy shifts, payment disruptions). The result is not a pure Born Global trajectory but a hybrid pattern in which speed and caution coexist as adaptive responses to contextual uncertainty.

6. TOWARD AN ADAPTIVE DIGITAL INTERNATIONALISATION FRAMEWORK

Collectively, the four emergent categories form an Adaptive Digital Internationalisation Framework that integrates insights from RBV, Uppsala, and Born Global perspectives while foregrounding the roles of social embeddedness, contextual adaptation, and dual-speed pathways in resource-constrained environments.

This framework proposes that sustainable digital-driven internationalisation in developing economies emerges through four interdependent mechanisms. The first mechanism, **Network-Enabled Market Access**, describes how diaspora and informal networks substitute for formal institutional infrastructure and enable credibility-building in foreign markets. The second mechanism, **Experiential Learning Under Constraint**, explains how capabilities develop through peer-based knowledge-sharing and iterative experimentation rather than formal training or strategic resource accumulation. The third mechanism, **Adaptive Digital Workarounds,** captures how improvisation and creative repurposing of low-cost tools generate competitive advantages that are contextually embedded and difficult to replicate. The fourth mechanism, **Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways,** reveals how firms navigate both incremental and accelerated routes simultaneously, with the specific trajectory determined by available social capital, digital literacy, and institutional stability.

This framework extends existing theory by demonstrating that in institutional voids, internationalisation is less a function of firm resources (RBV), experiential accumulation (Uppsala), or entrepreneurial intent (Born Global), and more a function of adaptive capacity to mobilise informal networks, substitute resources creatively, and navigate dual-speed pathways opportunistically. Digital platforms serve not as deterministic drivers of rapid internationalisation but as enabling infrastructures that amplify existing social and relational resources while exposing firms to new forms of institutional risk.

The framework thus offers a contextually grounded explanation of how SMEs in fragile economies achieve export competitiveness through digital channels, highlighting the centrality of social capital, adaptive ingenuity, and hybrid strategic logics that existing theories developed primarily in stable, resource-rich contexts do not fully capture.

7. PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The findings carry several practical implications for SMEs, policymakers, and support institutions. These centre on the prioritisation of affordable connectivity, mobile-first digital strategies, peer-based learning structures, payment system stabilisation, and diaspora network facilitation as foundational enablers of export competitiveness. A detailed discussion of these implications is provided in Section 7.2.2.

7.1 SYNTHESIS

The four emergent categories collectively illuminate SME digital internationalisation in Zambia and Zimbabwe as a hybrid, non-linear process shaped by digital affordances, relational capital, adaptive ingenuity, and institutional volatility. Together they constitute the Adaptive Digital Internationalisation Framework introduced in Section 6. The theoretical, practical, and policy implications of this framework are discussed in detail in Section 7.2.

7.2 IMPLICATIONS

This section discusses the theoretical, practical, and policy implications of the study's findings, demonstrating how the Adaptive Digital Internationalisation Framework contributes to scholarship and offers actionable guidance for stakeholders.

7.2.1 Theoretical contributions

This study makes three significant theoretical contributions to the literature on SME internationalisation and digital marketing. First, it extends the Resource-Based View (RBV) by demonstrating that in resource-constrained contexts, valuable, rare, and inimitable resources extend beyond tangible firm assets to include socially embedded and relationally constructed capabilities. The findings reveal that diaspora networks, informal digital labour, and creative workarounds function as VRIN-like assets precisely because they are contextually embedded and difficult for competitors to replicate. This challenges traditional RBV assumptions that emphasise resource accumulation, instead highlighting the strategic importance of resource substitution and adaptive reconfiguration in environments characterised by scarcity and institutional voids.

Second, the study nuances the Uppsala Internationalisation Model by revealing that digital platforms enable hybrid internationalisation pathways in which firms navigate both incremental (Uppsala-style) and accelerated (Born Global-style) routes simultaneously. While the Uppsala logic of experiential learning and gradual commitment remains relevant, digital tools compress the time required for learning and reduce psychic distance through real-time market feedback. However, they do not eliminate the need for iterative testing, relationship-building, and cautious market entry.

The result is a dual-speed pattern in which SMEs oscillate between rapid and gradual strategies depending on available social capital, digital literacy, and contextual opportunities. This finding suggests that the Uppsala model's linear, stage-based logic may be overly rigid for contexts where digital affordances and relational networks enable opportunistic acceleration alongside cautious experimentation.

Third, the study challenges Born Global assumptions by demonstrating that rapid digital internationalisation in developing economies depends less on entrepreneurial intent or advanced digital infrastructure and more on the availability of diaspora networks and informal relational capital. Born Global pathways in Zambia and Zimbabwe are fragile and contingent, often disrupted by payment instability, regulatory volatility, and logistical challenges. This finding reveals that Born Global theory, developed primarily in stable institutional environments, requires significant adaptation when applied to contexts marked by institutional fragility and resource constraints.

Collectively, these three contributions converge in the Adaptive Digital Internationalisation Framework, which integrates insights from RBV, Uppsala, and Born Global perspectives while foregrounding social embeddedness, contextual adaptation, and dual-speed pathways as defining features of internationalisation under constraint. The framework offers a contextually grounded account of how SMEs in fragile economies achieve export competitiveness through digital channels, illuminating dynamics that existing theories, developed primarily in resource-rich institutional settings, do not fully capture.

7.2.2 Practical implications

The findings carry several practical implications for SMEs, support institutions, and intermediaries. For SMEs, the study demonstrates that export competitiveness can be enhanced using simple and accessible digital tools, provided these tools are aligned with existing capabilities and resource realities. Rather than pursuing sophisticated e-commerce platforms or paid advertising campaigns that may be financially prohibitive, SMEs should focus on mobile-first strategies using WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram to build visibility, engage diaspora networks, and test demand iteratively. The study also underscores the value of peer-based learning through business groups, informal mentorship networks, and community knowledge-sharing platforms, which can substitute for formal digital marketing training.

For support institutions, the findings suggest that interventions should prioritise three areas. First, affordable and reliable connectivity remains a foundational requirement; without stable internet access and reasonable data costs, even the most enthusiastic digital adopters cannot sustain international engagement. Second, digital literacy programmes should be practical, sector-specific, and focused on low-cost tools that SMEs already use, rather than promoting advanced technologies that remain inaccessible to them. Third, support institutions should facilitate diaspora engagement through targeted trade missions, online networking platforms, and formal export intermediation programmes that leverage existing social capital rather than attempting to replace it with formal structures.

The study also highlights the critical importance of payment infrastructure. Mobile money systems such as EcoCash in Zimbabwe have proven essential for enabling cross-border transactions in the absence of reliable banking channels. Policymakers should prioritise the stabilisation and regulatory clarity of such systems, as payment disruptions directly undermine buyer confidence and SME credibility. Similarly, streamlining export documentation, reducing bureaucratic delays, and improving customs efficiency would reduce friction costs and strengthen SMEs' ability to deliver on international commitments.

7.2.3 Policy implications

At the policy level, the findings emphasise that digital transformation cannot proceed in isolation from broader infrastructural, financial, and institutional reforms. National digital strategies such as Zambia's Smart Zambia Master Plan and Zimbabwe's efforts to expand broadband access are necessary but insufficient. Implementation must be consistent, adequately funded, and extend beyond urban centres to reach rural and peri-urban SMEs that currently remain marginalised. Regional integration frameworks under SADC and COMESA hold potential but require greater visibility, accessibility, and alignment with SME realities. Currently, awareness of these initiatives is negligible among SMEs, suggesting a substantial disconnect between policy design and firm-level practice.

Policymakers should also consider targeted interventions that reduce the cost of digital entry for SMEs. This could include subsidised website hosting, grants for digital marketing campaigns, or tax incentives for firms that invest in formal online infrastructure. However, given the findings on informal adaptation, policies should not rigidly prescribe digital pathways but instead create enabling conditions that allow SMEs to experiment, learn, and scale at their own pace. Flexibility, rather than standardisation, is key in contexts where resource endowments and market conditions vary widely across firms and sectors.

Finally, the study highlights the need for policy coordination across multiple domains digital infrastructure, financial services, export facilitation, and skills development to create coherent ecosystems that support SME internationalisation. Fragmented interventions are unlikely to generate sustained impact; what is required is a holistic approach that recognises the interdependencies among infrastructure, institutions, and firm-level capabilities.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

8.1 STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, its qualitative design and focus on two countries limit the generalisability of findings. While the grounded theory approach enabled deep contextual understanding and the emergence of categories grounded in participant experiences, the insights may not apply directly to SMEs in other sub-Saharan African countries or developing regions with different institutional, infrastructural, or cultural conditions. Comparative studies across multiple African contexts would strengthen understanding of how digital internationalisation varies by country-level factors.

Second, the study's reliance on digitally active SMEs excludes firms that have not yet adopted online tools or those that have experimented with digital marketing but discontinued use. This sampling approach limits insights into barriers to initial adoption and the reasons for digital disengagement. Future research should examine non-adopters and discontinued users to provide a more complete picture of the digital internationalisation landscape.

Third, the study's cross-sectional design captures SME experiences at a single point in time, limiting understanding of how digital strategies evolve over extended periods. Longitudinal research tracking firms over multiple years would illuminate trajectories of digital maturation, adaptation to changing institutional environments, and the sustainability of informal workarounds as firms scale up. Such research would also clarify whether Born Global patterns observed among some SMEs represent temporary opportunism or sustainable strategic orientation.

Fourth, the study focuses primarily on firm-level and institutional factors, giving less attention to consumer behaviour, buyer preferences, and demand-side dynamics in developed markets. Future research should explore how consumers in developed markets perceive and respond to digital marketing by African SMEs, examining issues of trust, authenticity, quality signalling, and cultural resonance that shape purchasing decisions.

8.2 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, quantitative studies employing larger samples and survey methods could test the generalisability of the Adaptive Digital Internationalisation Framework across diverse contexts, sectors, and firm sizes. Such research would clarify the boundary conditions under which the framework applies and identify contextual moderators that strengthen or weaken the relationships among the four core categories.

Second, comparative research examining digital internationalisation in other developing regions such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, or Latin America would illuminate whether the patterns observed in Zambia and Zimbabwe are unique to sub-Saharan Africa or reflect broader dynamics characteristic of resource-constrained environments. Cross-regional comparisons would also identify region-specific institutional, cultural, or technological factors that shape digital adoption and export behaviour.

Third, research examining the role of specific digital platforms such as e-commerce marketplaces (for instance, Etsy and Amazon), social commerce platforms (e.g., Instagram Shopping and Facebook Marketplace), and industry-specific portals would provide granular insights into how platform affordances, algorithms, and governance structures shape SME outcomes. Platform-level analysis would also clarify power asymmetries, data ownership concerns, and the risks of platform dependency that may emerge as SMEs scale.

Fourth, future research should explore the sustainability and scalability of informal digital practices identified in this study. While WhatsApp catalogues, diaspora logistics, and peer learning networks enable initial market entry, it remains unclear whether these mechanisms can support long-term growth or whether firms eventually transition to more formalised systems. Research tracking firms longitudinally would clarify pathways from informal experimentation to strategic formalisation, identifying the conditions under which informal practices become institutionalised or are replaced by more structured alternatives.

Finally, research examining policy interventions and their effectiveness in supporting digital SME internationalisation would provide actionable guidance for governments and development agencies. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs evaluating digital literacy programmes, export grants, connectivity subsidies, or diaspora engagement initiatives would generate evidence on which interventions yield measurable improvements in SME export performance and digital capabilities.

9. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital marketing has become a critical mechanism through which SMEs in Zambia and Zimbabwe navigate the complexities of entering and competing in developed markets. Although digital platforms reduce entry barriers, enhance visibility, and enable low-cost communication with international buyers, their potential remains mediated by structural and institutional conditions that shape adoption patterns, strategic choices, and export outcomes.

The study contributes to theory by proposing the Adaptive Digital Internationalisation Framework, which integrates and extends the Resource-Based View, Uppsala Internationalisation Model, and Born Global theory. The framework demonstrates that in resource-constrained contexts, sustainable digital-driven internationalisation emerges through four interdependent mechanisms: Network-Enabled Market Access, Experiential Learning Under Constraint, Adaptive Digital Workarounds, and Hybrid Internationalisation Pathways. These mechanisms reflect how SMEs leverage social capital, adaptive ingenuity, and opportunistic pathway navigation to overcome institutional voids and achieve export competitiveness.

Practically, the study offers actionable guidance for SMEs, policymakers, and support organisations seeking to enhance digital export capability. It underscores the importance of accessible connectivity, practical digital literacy, payment infrastructure stability, and diaspora network facilitation as foundational enablers of SME internationalisation. It also highlights the need for policy coordination across infrastructure, finance, and trade facilitation to create coherent ecosystems that support sustained digital engagement.

The research provides a grounded account of how SMEs in Zambia and Zimbabwe mobilise digital tools to pursue opportunities in developed markets despite operating under conditions of resource scarcity, institutional fragility, and infrastructural weakness. By foregrounding the roles of social embeddedness, adaptive innovation, and hybrid strategic logics, the study challenges assumptions embedded in existing internationalisation theories and offers a contextually grounded framework that reflects the lived realities of SMEs in developing economies. As digitalisation continues to reshape global trade, understanding these dynamics becomes essential for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners committed to fostering inclusive and sustainable internationalisation pathways for firms in emerging markets.

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